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Vietnamese table etiquette. By: Pham, Andrew X.. Faces (07491387), Sep97, Vol. 14 Issue 1, p40, 2p, 2 color; Abstract: Presents the author's experience of eating at the home of a traditional Vietnamese family. Importance of knowing about Vietnamese table etiquette; Presentation of suggestions for making the dinner a success. INSET: Eating with sticks, by Judy Monroe.. Reading Level (Lexile): 770; (AN 9710086131)

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VIETNAMESE TABLE ETIQUETTE

The fish gaped E at me. Its glassy bubble eyes regarded me with equanimity. My Vietnamese hostess had just placed the fish, which was the size of a pig, on the table in front of me, with the bullet-shaped head aimed at my chest. Everyone around the table was watching my reaction.

Unnerved, I could manage only a goofy grin. Did they expect me to eat the fish's head? "Eat. Please eat," my hostess urged. The chopsticks in my hand clattered like reeds in the wind. Fish head, eyes, and gills lay before me, all unacquired tastes.

"It's not much," my hostess said. (The fish was longer than my arm.) "It's a simple dish, not much flavor." (It looked more any Thanksgiving turkey I'd ever had.) "Eat. Eat."

My mind raced. How to decline without offending? How to eat that huge head without vomiting? Then it struck me -- my grandmother's lesson in etiquette. I was the guest of honor, hence the fish head. It was positioned to honor me with the choicest meat, the part just behind the head, above the gills.

I sampled the fish and complimented my hostess. The meal continued without a hitch.

Knowing a little Vietnamese table etiquette can take a foreigner a long way when dining as the honored guest of a Vietnamese family. Here are a few simple rules to follow should you ever be in that position.

Always bring a present when invited to dinner. Flowers are acceptable as long as they are not white, which represents death. Other common gifts are sweets and teas.

The host and hostess will see to it that a guest has more than enough to eat, including the first bite from each plate. But a guest should never sample a dish first unless the host insists.

Never take more than a single helping from any plate without first trying all the other dishes on the table. A tablespoonful constitutes a helping. If serving spoons are not provided, one or two trips of the chopsticks to the serving dish represent one serving.

Never dwell on any one dish, and always compliment the food after the first taste.

Do not pour dipping sauces directly into the rice bowl. Keep one hand on the bowl while you are eating, even if you do not pick it up.

Use both hands when offering or accepting a dish, a cup, or a pair of chopsticks. A little nod also is expected when you pass or accept something at the table.

It is considered rude to decline the offer of a second or third helping.

The best course of action is to imitate the host's table manners as closely as possible. If you commit a dining faux pas, a forthright apology and a declaration of etiquette ignorance are in order.

Equanimity (EH-kwa-NIM-i-tee) is the quality of being calm and composed.

A faux pas (foe-PAW) is a breach of eti-quette. It comes from the French phrase meaning "false step."

ILLUSTRATION

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by Andrew X. Pham

#### **EATING WITH STICKS**

It is mealtime in Vietnam, but forks and knives are nowhere to be seen. Instead, each person gets a serving spoon and a pair of chopsticks to carry food from plate or bowl to mouth.

Young children use short chopsticks that are five to six inches long. Everyone else eats with sticks measuring about ten inches long. Thick as a pencil, the slender sticks are usually made from bamboo, wood, or plastic. More expensive chopsticks are made from coral, jade, gold, silver, or ivory.

Although the Chinese invented chopsticks more than 3,000 years ago, no one knows why. One reason could be China's constant fuel shortage. To save precious fuel, cooks cut food into small pieces so that it would cook fast over a hot fire. Chopsticks were the perfect utensils to transfer bite-size pieces of food to hungry mouths. Another theory holds that among warlike ancient people the absence of table knives showed guests that they need not fear their hosts.

The Chinese name for the sticks, kuai zi, means "something quick." Englishspeaking people translated this as "to chop," which eventually became "chopsticks." The Vietnamese call chopsticks doi dua.

PHOTO (COLOR): Some Vietnamese children having a meal.

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by Judy Monroe

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